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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to offer an alternative explanation of why the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, and educational research in general, has such a low status and its connection to education reform is so remote. Emphasis placed on the differences that divide reformers, researchers, and educators instead of similarities that bind them together lie at the root of why the educational system is still at risk after a decade of reform. A specific group needs to focus attention on how available knowledge is being used. The current system of top-down reform is not working effectively because it does not give teachers and educational professionals a voice in formulating educational-reform policies that they are asked to implement. Imposing educational reform on teachers contradicts a democratic value that says those who are affected by a decision should have a voice in making that decision. Recommendations to improve the status of educational research include the following: (1) reexamine the traditional assumptions of educational research; (2) focus more closely on the "democratic socio-technical" model, by Wirth; (3) encourage values that bring us together as democratic citizens; and (4) bring more teachers into the process of educational research. (KDP)

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DEMOCRATIZING EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH OR WHY IS OUR NATION STILL
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DEMOCRATIZING EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH OR WHY IS OUR NATION STILL
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INTRODUCTION

It was with considerable interest and concern that I read in the "Point of View" section of the April 7, 1993 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education an essay entitled "Enhancing the Federal Role in Research on Education" written by Diane Ravitch, former Assistant Secretary for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Among other things she observed:

Although most of OERI'S programs have particular Congressional protectors, educational research and development as a whole has few friends in Congress. Because it gets so little money, it has little stature compared to programs that dispense billions. As I knocked on Congressional doors seeking a champion, most Congressmen said that educational research was just a lot of jargon, that it had little of value for teachers, and that we already know all we need to know. I knew that there was some truth in this stereotype, but I also believe that the low esteem accorded educational research and its chronic lack of funding has driven first-rate researchers to other fields.

After commenting on the politics of educational research and identifying some accomplishments of OERI during her tenure she concluded:

We need a stable, long-range program of research and development to accompany, monitor, and improve our nation's investment of hundreds of billions of dollars each year in education. We will never have such a program until the turf fighting ends and the agency is accorded the discretion and the money that it needs to attract a first-rate staff.

The purpose of this paper is to offer an alternative explanation of why OERI, and educational research in general,

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has such a low status and its connection to educational reform is so remote. I shall argue that "instituting rigorous quality controls for research," and "attracting first-rate well qualified researchers" are not likely to increase the friends that research and development has in Congress or change the perception that educational research is a lot of jargon which has little value to teachers, because it assumes that research and the knowledge that results from it is produced and legitimated by experts who then inform others on "what we know" and "what we need to know." This top-down, hierarchical, authoritarian, or what Arthur Wirth (1989) has called "the technocratic control" model "is doing us in" because it is based on an inadequate consideration of the importance of the context in which educational research is conducted and its results communicated and utilized.

IS OUR NATION STILL AT RISK AFTER TEN YEARS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM?

In an introductory comment to an article by Terrel H. Bell, "Reflections One Decade After A Nation at Risk" the editors of the April, 1993 issue of Phi Delta Kappan note, "Looking back over the past decade, Mr. Bell concludes that the top-down reforms characteristic of the Eighties were, for the most part, ineffective." (p. 592). Bell (1993) goes on to say:

The top-down initiative by the states failed to come anywhere near to meeting the expectations of those who sponsored the legislation. And we soon learned that gains in student achievement, declines in high

school dropout rates, and other desired outcomes cannot be attained simply by changing standards and mandating procedures and practices. A much more massive, systemwide effort is required that engages parents, neighborhoods, and communities. We had placed too much confidence in school reforms that affected only six hours of a child's life and ignored the other 18 hours each weekday plus the hours on weekends and holidays. (p. 594).

What I would point out about the above quotation by Bell is that an important group that also must be engaged in education reform and/or restructuring is the teachers and other educational professionals whose task is to implement the reforms.

In an introductory comment to an article by Emeral A. Crosby in, "The 'At-Risk,' Decade," the editors of the same issue of Phi Delta Kappan remark, "Ten years after A Nation at Risk, we still lack the will and the commitment to reduce the risks that imperil our children, Mr. Crosby maintains." Crosby (1993) observes:

A careful scrutiny of educational practices in schools today reveals an appalling gap between the rhetoric of equal opportunity and the reality of practice. Schools do not extend the same kind of justice and opportunity to at-risk students as they give to the children of the socially and economically well-off. Somehow, with all the technical ingenuity that we Americans possess, we have not been able to provide all students comparable access to talented, knowledgeable, and skilled teachers --nor have we allocated resources for infrastructure and technology in a way that ensures that all facilities are comparable. (p. 599).

Mr. Crosby (1993) concludes:

In the land of the free and the home of the brave, it is astounding that we do not have courage enough to do what we need to do. Ten years after A Nation at Risk, we still lack the will and the commitment to reduce the risks that imperil our children. (p. 604).

Olson and Rothman (1993) observe "after a decade of

effort, most reforms are still identified with a handful of prominent individuals and have not become common currency within the education community as a whole." (p.17).

Clinchy (1993) suggests that:
even we democratically minded reformers may not yet be asking the truly important questions. It is all too possible that neither we educators nor (so far) the Clinton Administration are responding to the real problems that face this society-- increased poverty and homelessness, the collapse of the inner cities and the creation of drug-ridden urban killing zones, the ongoing destruction of the natural and manmade environments, and the spread of unemployment and economic and social despair. And we are perhaps particularly ignoring the vast changes in the structure of the American family. We have yet to address the problems of single working mothers with no child support, of teenage mothers, of children whose older brothers and sisters have been killed out on the streets, and of children being raised by grandparents. (p. 611).

Kirst (1993) observes that:

The U. S. system of public education has been a crucial element in unifying a nation of immigrants, producing the unum from the pluribus. More immigrants entered the U. S. in the two decades between 1970 and 1990 than in any previous 20-year period. Consequently, the need to teach community values and concepts is just as urgent as it was during the rise of common schools at the turn of the century. If the public schools do not include the vast majority of our children, the only other common transmitter of our culture will be television. And so far television does not seem to have had a positive influence on American youth.

We have lost much of the national cohesiveness that the common school crusaders helped to create. Today, powerful and well-organized interest groups--whether labor, business, or agriculture--have no inclination to unite with other segments of the community to explore differences and work toward the common good. Although the leaders of these interest groups are not irresponsible, they have developed attitudes that make collaboration with others almost impossible. Since each group feels that it is not getting what it deserves, the leaders are in no mood to work with others to shape a constructive future. (pp. 613-616).

DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND NATIONAL COHESIVENESS

It is fashionable today for some to argue for what they refer to as a "post-modern" view of the world and education. Pignatelli (1993) notes, "there seems to be no more fundamental and vital a principle marking our modernity than a belief in social progress through the broadest cultivation and application of reason." (p. 8). He also identifies "three strong views of the term 'postmodern,'" and quotes Fritzman (1990) suggesting that it is best characterized, succinctly, as "the consistent introduction of dissensus into consensus." (p. 8). Along these lines, she argues, a postmodern education would involve "the search for new ideas and concepts which disrupt and destabilize previously existing consensus." (p. 8). "Yet it is also true," says Pignatelli (1993), "that postmodernism, precisely because of its subversive appeal, its movement toward disengagement rather than commitment and solidarity, risks, as Nicholson (1989) observes, 'nihilism on the one hand, and apologies for the status quo on the other.'" (p. 9).

It is here that we locate what I take to be a major reason why our nation is still at risk after ten years of educational reform. In various ways, we may have placed so much emphasis on our differences that we have lost sight of those things that bind us together. This has led to disengagement rather than commitment and solidarity. And has not permitted us to bring about significant educational

reform.

It might be informative to review some of the insights one of the greatest common school crusaders--Horace Mann--had about national cohesiveness. Lawrence A. Cremin (1957) in his "Horace Mann's Legacy" (p. 8) observes that:

Mann was tremendously impressed with the heterogeneity of the American population. He marveled at its vast diversity of social, ethnic, and religious groups and manifested concern lest conflicts of value rip apart the body politic and render it powerless. Fearing the destructive possibilities of religious, political, and class discord, he sought a common value system which might undergird American republicanism and within which a healthy diversity might thrive. His quest was for a public philosophy, a sense of community which might be shared by Americans of every variety and persuasion. His effort was to use education to fashion a new American character out of a maze of conflicting cultural traditions. And his tool was the common school. (p. 8).

. . . Thus, public--or common--schools can teach such publicly accepted virtues as brotherly love, kindness, generosity, amiability, and others, leaving to home and church the task of teaching the differing private sectarian creeds which sanction these virtues. (p. 14). He also thought that public control of the common schools was the means for defining this common value system.

CONCLUSIONS

I have explored elsewhere (Radebaugh, 1991) some of the meanings that have come to be attached to the term "democracy" (or republicanism as Mann would say), some research procedures that might be used for identifying basic democratic values, and the results of some research intended to identify basic democratic values. Out of a list of 26 basic democratic values this research identified I shall mention only two of them here:

- (1) Using knowledge and reflective human thought to promote the welfare of all men and to build

a better world.

- (2) Encouraging those affected by a decision to have a voice in making that decision and assuming responsibility for the consequences of that decision. . . . (pp. 3-4).

It is not my intent to argue against the effort to gain new knowledge in education or the importance of experts in this regard. I shall, however, suggest that some group or institution, perhaps DEAI itself, perhaps colleges of education, should focus increased attention on what we do with the knowledge we already possess, develop political strategies intended to marshal commitment from the people to the importance of a high quality education for everyone based on the best knowledge available, and consider the possibility that education is so important that the people do not want to turn it and our future over to "experts" but want to participate in deciding what it should be themselves.

I also propose that one of the major reasons that teachers see little value in the results of a great deal of educational research is that it is often "imposed" on them by legislative decree or administrative fiat. This approach contradicts democratic value number two described above. They have no sense of ownership of it, no commitment to it, and, in fact, devise ways to ignore or subvert it. The result is an antagonism toward new knowledge--a great tragedy for educational reform and its hope for the improvement of the quality of education for all the people.

It seems to me that if we want to improve the status of educational research and facilitate desirable educational

reform we should (1) re-examine the assumptions which have given rise to traditional educational research especially that it is the sole domain of "experts," (2) give increased attention to the "democratic socio-technical" model developed by Wirth, (3) place increased effort on developing those values that unite us as democratic citizens, and (4) democratize educational research in the sense that more teachers are involved in it, develop "ownership" of its results and a commitment to implementing new knowledge into practice.

I also want to suggest the possibility that we can turn to the conception of democracy itself, conceived of as a way of living characterized by certain basic values, for those ideas, commitments, and values that might help us build a national cohesiveness--a public philosophy--that will lead to the collaboration necessary to bring about genuine educational reform.

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